



# Where to Build a Fort

**Key Question:** How did the topographic engineers decide where to build Fort Brown?

**Relevance to Student Knowledge:**  
Students understand that cities need to be water, food, and supplies.

**Student Learning Objectives:**  
Students will understand what items are needed to determine the best location for a fort and use evidence to defend their choice.

## TEKS

*History:* 4.3 (D) Impact of Mexican War on Texas

*Geography:* 4.8 (D) Explain geographic factors that influence patterns of settlement and distribution of population in Texas, past & present

*Soc. Studies Skills:* 4.22 (C) Interpret information in maps

*Soc. Studies Skills:* 4.23 (B) Incorporate main and supporting ideas in verbal communication

*Language Arts:* 1.13 (D) Interpret & use graphic info., such as maps

## Trunk Materials

- Video: *Eyewitness to War News* (36 minutes)
- Master student worksheet **Where to Build a Fort**

## Teacher-Supplied Materials

- Copies of student worksheet **Where to Build a Fort**

**BACKGROUND:** The site unofficially referred to as Fort Texas was a fieldwork, taking the rough shape of a six-sided star. Each packed-earth face of the fort extended from 125 to 150 yards. The walls were 9 ft. high and 15 ft. wide, with a moat, 20 ft. wide and 8 ft. deep circling the exterior. Inside, U.S. troops constructed a number of bomb-proofs and powder magazines to provide shelter from any incoming fire.

Mexican General Arista began positioning artillery and troops around the fort shortly after General Taylor departed on May 1, 1846. And, at 5 a.m. on May 3, 1846, Mexican forces opened fire on the fort from guns placed directly across the Rio Grande. Troops of the U.S. 7th Infantry quickly responded with their own artillery. When additional cannon fire erupted from Mexican positions up and down the river's bank, fort commander Jacob Brown pointed his guns into the city of Matamoros. Fire continued on both sides until well into the night.

In time, this artillery exchange gave way to a prolonged standoff. Despite the steady Mexican fire of May 3, the earthen walls of the fort withstood the impacts well. Mexican leaders apparently acknowledged the lack of success and, in the ensuing days, firing on the fort diminished considerably. Apparently believing that a charge on the fort would produce heavy casualties in his own ranks, Mexican General Pedro de Ampudia instead settled in for a more traditional siege in the hope that General Arista's army could prevent assistance from reaching the fort.

The cannonade from within the fort declined as well. Realizing that the shots directed on Matamoros were having minimal effect, Major Brown called for a halt to firing. Over the next several days, the U.S. troops conserved their limited ammunition, offered only brief flurries of return fire, and concentrated on shoring up the defenses of their post. Otherwise, the soldiers could do little but wait for General Taylor to march to the rescue.

When that advance finally came, Mexican troops received orders to assist in efforts to halt the U.S. Army. Although artillery continued a sporadic fire upon the fort, much of the Mexican infantry and cavalry surrounding the post moved forward to join the fighting at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma.

The U.S. soldiers in Fort Texas first learned of the advance from the distant rumble of cannon fire at Palo Alto on May 8. Additional sounds of battle revealed that fighting had reached Resaca de la Palma on May 9. And that afternoon, the sight of hundreds of Mexican soldiers rushing to crossing points on the Rio Grande indicated that Taylor's troops had been victorious.

The U.S. victory at Resaca de la Palma brought an end to the 6-day bombardment of the fort. Apparently concerned that the fire might strike their own retreating forces, Mexican gunners immediately halted their cannonade of the fort. U.S. soldiers briefly fired upon the retreating Mexican troops, but they halted when it appeared that they might strike their own compatriots, following in close pursuit.

Though the confrontation at Fort Texas lasted six days, with periods of heavy cannon fire, casualties were remarkably low. Only two U.S. soldiers died in the bombardment, but that toll included the fort commander Jacob Brown. Major Brown was struck in the leg by a cannon ball on May 6. He survived for several days only to die on May 9, just hours before the siege ended. Despite his wound, Brown had helped maintain troop morale throughout the siege and his men named the liberated post—Fort Brown—in his honor.

Mexican leaders reported two killed and two wounded from U.S. artillery fire during the siege. The effect of artillery fire on the civilian population of Matamoros is unknown.

## MANAGEMENT

1. Preview the activity and video segments **#5: Presidents Polk & Paredes** (3 min., 30 sec.) & **#1: Ft. Brown** (3 min., 10 sec.).
2. If possible, get a map of the school.

### Vocabulary

- Depot: Place where military supplies are kept

## LESSON

### Introduction

1. Divide students into small working groups
2. Have each group make a map of where their classroom is within the school.
3. Tell students to include the following on their map:
  - Drinking Fountains
  - Restrooms
  - Cafeteria
  - Front Door
  - Fire Exit
  - Office
  - Library
4. Tell students to make a legend for their map.
5. Have each group share their map.
6. If possible, show students a map of the school.

### Guided Lesson

1. View **Segment #5: Presidents Polk & Paredes**.
2. Tell students: You are now U.S. topographic engineers. You are ordered to choose the best location for a fort to defend the southern boundary of the United States – the Rio Grande.
2. Ask students: What is needed for the best location to build a fort? List responses. Be sure to mention the following:
  - Availability of water for drinking and bathing
  - Availability of wood for fuel
  - Availability of grass for horses and oxen
  - Land routes for moving supplies and soldiers
  - Water routes for moving supplies and soldiers
  - Close to a supply **depot** (define *depot* or have students look up the definition)

# LESSON

## Discovery

1. Tell students: You will be given a map. Draw the best location for the fort on your map.
2. Divide students into small working groups.
3. Hand out the student worksheet **Rio Grande Valley** to each group.
4. Tell students that the labeled cities can serve as possible supply depots.
5. Have students work together to complete the worksheet.

## Wrap- up Activities

1. Have each group share their decision, along with reasons why they made that decision.
2. As a class, decide on the best location for the fort.
3. Hand out the student worksheet **Where to Build a Fort**.
4. Compare and contrast the class choice with the actual location (across from Matamoros where the University of Texas-Brownsville is today).
5. Tell students they will watch a video about Fort Brown.
6. View **Segment #1: Fort Brown**.

## Extensions

1. Make a display of the maps.

**Student Evaluation/Assessment:** Use the student worksheet and class participation as evaluation tools.

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special places saved by the American people  
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**Draw an X on a spot along the Rio Grande where you would build the fort.**